

**Thomas Jefferson to John Page, February 20, 1802,
Postscript Dated March 9, from The Works of Thomas
Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected
and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.**

TO JOHN PAGE J. MSS.

Washington, Feb. 20, 1802.

My dear friend, —I pray you, in the first place, that the contents of this letter may be inviolably secret, until promulgated by some public act. In my letter of March 2d, I mentioned to you that the mint had been left at Philadelphia merely because taken up by the legislature too late to decide on it. The subject is now resumed, and there is no doubt the institution will be suppressed. This of course prevents the prospect of employing your talents worthily in that department. Another difficulty has occurred, of which at that time I was not apprized. Virginia is greatly over her due proportion of appointments in the general government; and tho' this has not been done by me, it would be imputed as blamed to me to add to her proportion. So that for all general offices persons to fill them must for some time be sought from other states, and only offices which are to be exercised within the state can be given to its own citizens. This leaves but little scope for placing talents in offices to which they are analogous, and must apologize for what I am about to propose to you. Col. Heath, the collector of the customs at Petersburg must be removed on account of the irritability of his temper, and the fury of his Federalism. His office will probably be worth in future from 2. to 3. thousand D. a year as you will see by the inclosed paper. In proposing it to you, I am governed only by a desire to be useful to you, and at the same time to place the office in hands equal to its duties and acceptable to the public. What its labours are, I know not. Its responsibility is very great; as prodigious sums pass through

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it, which, where there is no bank to deposit them in for safe-keeping, lie at considerable risk. It requires too the utmost vigilance of the principal over his clerks, as we have seen the collectors of South Carolina, Pennsylv & N. York and some others, not only ruin themselves, but their securities also, and still great loss falling on the public; and this from the sole fraud of the clerk. I should suppose indeed that nothing could secure the principal but a vigorous refusal to let his clerks ever touch a dollar, and an inflexible reservation of the care & custody

of the iron chest to himself. With this precaution, these officers are the best in the U. S. Although I know your character to be much inclined to indulgence, and confidence in others, yet I know also that when you are apprized that the safety of yourself and family, of your securities and of the public and your own reputation also would require you not to trust any body but yourself, your sense of duty is too strong to leave any hesitation. I mention these circumstances, because I wish you to be apprized of the dangers as well as the benefits of the office, and to make up your judgment on a view of the whole subject. It would require your removal to Petersburg where the office is kept. Taking convenient time to consider of it, you will be so good as to inform me as soon as you can decide whether you will accept the office or not. There was for some time an expectation that Colonel Davies's death would have produced a vacancy in that office, which is a better one than that of Petersburg. But I believe that expectation is over. Present me respectfully to Mrs. Page, and accept yourself assurances of my constant & affectionate esteem.¹

¹ The history of Page's office holding furnishes perhaps the most curious instance of the use of public offices for private benefit, and deserves to be told at length. In continuance of the above letter, Jefferson wrote:

"Washington, Apr. 2, 1802.

"Dear Sir,—Yours of Mar. 27th was received last night; and the object of the present is to assure you that you may take your own time for making inquiries and deliberating for

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a final decision on the proposition made you in my former letter. Only let your inquiries be so conducted as not to permit the object to be suspected in the least. I am afraid it might not be prudent to take into calculation the chance of removal to any other office, unless some one were to become vacant in the state, on account of the over proportion which Virginia has at present in the general offices of the federal government, tho' only one of these (Mr. Madison) has been put in by me, any room given for an imputation of partiality in me of this kind would expose me to peculiar reproach, besides increasing the clamour artificially raised against Virginia. As soon as any alteration is made by the legislature in the emoluments of the office proposed to you, I will communicate it to you. In the meantime it may be calculated with probability at what Mr. Gallatin has supposed. Present my respectful compliments to Mrs. Page, and accept yourself assurances of my constant and sincere friendship.”

“ Monticello, May 7, 1802.

“ My dear Friend,—The operation which Congress has performed on the fees of the customs house officers [*illegible*] was expected. From that at Petersburg particularly they have taken only the salary of 250 D. which they have given to Richmond. Consequently the emoluments will be as represented in the paper sent you, only deducting the 250. d. This I think will make it about 750 a year more than Mr. Gallatin there expected. On this view of the subject I cannot but again propose it to you, being unwilling you should not have the best place it will ever be in my power to dispose of in this state. I am not without hopes your son will give you his aid: or that you can find some other entirely trustworthy. Colonel Byrd's misfortunes probably proceeded from a want of the power of self-denial; which your integrity will sufficiently guard against. I believe he was also too easy in his credits to the merchants. On that subject, a rule being laid down by you, and inflexibly persevered in they will arrange themselves to it without difficulty, as they do in their transactions with the banks. This attention and keeping yourself the key of the strong box will effectually guard against the possibility of loss. Take the subject, therefore, my friend, once more into consideration, and let me know your final determination keeping now as

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before inviolably secret that anything is contemplated, until we make it public. Be so good as to present my respects to Mrs, Page, and to be assured yourself of my affectionate and constant attachment. I am here only for a fortnight.”

In December, 1802, Page was elected Governor of Virginia, and held that office for three years, thus no longer needing assistance; but shortly after the end of his term, Jefferson wrote his old friend as follows:

“ Washington, 3 July, 1806.

“My Dear Friend,—By a letter from Mr. Walker to Mr. Madison I learn that he had visited you lately at Rosewell, and thought that some occupation in the public concerns would not be refused by you. I wish there was anything to offer which might give you amusement, profit and little labor; but our's you know is not a government of any great choice of office. We have reason to consider as very near at hand a vacancy in an office, which indeed could offer you no amusement, little emolument, but also no labor. The death of the present worthy loan officer (Mr. Jones) is considered as inevitably close at hand. This opinion I have from the best medical judge, and the proposing it to you occurs from the information of Mr. Walker's letter. The salary is 1500 D a year, and 150 or 200 D more as commission on payment of pensions. Stationary is allowed, but neither office hire nor fuel. 1000 D additional are permitted to be divided between two clerks as the principal pleases. Mr. Gallatin says that a residence so near to Richmond as that you could ride there once or twice a week, would be sufficient, and that the office books being deposited with the Richmond bank a little before quarter day, they would make all the paiments without charge, considering as a sufficient emolument the deposit of the public money with them, which would at the same time save you from trouble and risk. The business can be done by one clerk, but there must still be two. However, nearly all the salary is given to the efficient clerk, and a minimum to the one who is merely nominal, or at least, this may be the arrangement, if it is not so at present. There is probably a clerk in the office well skilled in the business, and whom it might be necessary to keep some time. In the meanwhile

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if one of your sons could come in as a secondary, in proportion as he advances in his knolege of the business, he might divide in the salary more and more largely, and finally take the principal place and salary, to the Commissioner of loans himself. The office is a perfect sinecure.

“The introduction of one of your sons into the office, besides adding the benefit of the additional thousand dollars to the family, would, by placing him as it were in possession of the office, secure his succeeding to it in that event which you and I ought now to consider as not very remote. I pray that this letter may be considered as strictly confidential to Mrs. Page and yourself, and as soon as you have made up your mind, to be so good as to apprise me of it, because to the solicitations already received, a flood of others will be added on the death of the incumbent. I confess I look to your decision with the more hope, as it would once more place you within reach of Monticello. I understand from Mr. Gallatin that the circumstance which renders necessary the residence of the officer in the vicinity of Richmond is the occasional transfer of stock, to which his signature is indispensable, and that these transfers being suspended some time before and after quarter day, admits an absence of 3 or 4 weeks at each of these periods.”

Page was accordingly appointed to this office, but his ill-health made even its duties hard to him, and Jefferson presently wrote him:

“ Monticello, Sep. 6, '08.

“ My dear friend,—‘In the midst of life, we are in death,’ so has said some great moralist, and so says truth even for the young: and how much rather for us who have closed our thirteenth lustre! I have, moreover, heard that you have been particularly afflicted by want of health latterly, insomuch as to make it probable the indispensable attentions to your office are burthensome to you. Would it be a relief to transfer the office to your son Francis for your use with an understanding that it should afterwards continue with him for the benefit of the family? Or would you rather retain it in your own name during your life, with

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the probability (for we cannot be certain of what is distant) that he will succeed you for the same family benefit? Decide on this my friend, according to your own wishes, and if the execution falls within the compass of my time and powers, count upon it with the sacred confidence which your merits, my affections, and the gratitude of our country will justify. God bless you, and give you health of days. He shall do better for you.”

Page continued to hold this office till his death, but he was offered another by Jefferson at one time, in the following letter:

“ Washington, June 10, '07.

“ My dear friend,—This letter is entirely confidential. I am warned by sollicitations for the post-office at Richmond, that it is likely to become vacant by the death of the present incumbent. The office you now hold will be abolished when our public debt shall be discharged. In consideration of this circumstance, of the comparative emoluments and labor and confinement, of the two offices, will you make up your mind whether you would prefer being transferred to the other place, and be so good as to inform me of your choice as soon as you can have decided on it. It will be desirable to me to cut short applications by filling the place the moment I know it is vacant. Present me respectfully to Mrs. Page, and with the assurance of my constant attachment and respect, accept my friendly salutations.”

P. S. Mar. 9. I have withheld this letter some days on an expectation that Mr. Gallatin would be able to say something further on the subject of the emoluments of the office. He says that a committee are about to propose reductions of the emoluments of all the collectors. He is of opinion this will be reduced so as to stand somewhere between two & three thousand dollars. I thought it best to apprise you of everything. Gallatin mentions a very necessary caution against trusting the merchants beyond the time of their bonds

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so as to make yourself responsible. Mr. Gallatin says the office at Norfolk is not near so profitable as that of Petersburg.